Pakistan moves in right direction

Pakistan Shipbreakers' Association secretary Asif Ali Khan says plans have been laid to ensure that the country's recycling industry meets both local and international safety thresholds.

He claims Pakistan, whose scrapping of ships is concentrated at Gadani, will be ahead of India's Alang and Chittagong in Bangladesh in complying with international safety and environmental-protection requirements.

Khan's comments to Trade-Winds follow a recent article by cash buyers Global Marketing Systems (GMS) attacking what it claims is an outdated and inaccurate image of the industry given by the media and pressure groups. GMS chief executive Anil Sharma focused on Alang in an American Club magazine article where he says ship-recycling yards had responded positively to criticism, including investing millions of rupees on disposal facilities for hazardous waste.

Khan adds to the ongoing war-of-words by insisting that the industry has come a long way in recent years and that it would soon "aggressively" launch a programme to ensure breakers in Pakistan comply with at least the basic rules and guidelines.

The association's first task is to get the message across and then provide the "guidance" to upgrade, he says. As well as local demands by the Pakistan environmental-protection agency, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) is drafting a mandatory international ship-recycling convention for adoption in the 2008-2009 biennium.

On the subject of what Sharma referred to in his article as the myth of "half-naked workers", Khan says employees at recycling facilities in Pakistan are now being issued safety helmets and boots and use safety lines when on board vessels. "People are ready to make these changes," said Khan. "It is positive and I hope very soon we will have a full [safety]system put in place here."

However, Khan admits people are reluctant to invest heavily in ship scrapping because the market is so cyclical.

"In one year we imported 300,000 tonnes, in another not even 30,000 tonnes," he said.

However, he claims that already virtually all handling of steel is mechanised. "No one has to lift [scrap]on their shoulders," he said. Breakers follow regulations governing the cleaning of tanks and obtaining gas-free certificates. Consequently, Khan argues, Pakistan has a good accident record despite handling mainly the recycling of tankers. But he accepts that sometimes poorly educated workers result in yards being lax on providing documentation to the authorities, a situation the shipbreakers' association intends to improve.

"These guys are ready and willing" to accept change, says Khan.

By Geoff Garfield, London

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